It Had To Be You

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It Had To Be You

by discocuri

Summary

Shane is a reporter for The New Yorker. Ilya works as a political consultant at the Russian Consulate. They've known each other since being rivals on the hockey team in college. It took a while for them to become friends, but since they have, the pair have gotten close. Very close. As their bachelor years dwindle, they decide to try to set one another up with their best girlfriends. It doesn't go as they'd hoped.

Or, Hudson inspired me to write a When Harry Met Sally AU.

Happy New Year.

Notes

A little one-shot because it's New Year's and the Heated Rivalry brainworms have fused with my When Harry Met Sally fanaticism.

See the end of the work for more notes

Shane was a reporter, not a matchmaker. He didn't exactly consider himself an expert in matters of the heart. This had been Ilya's idea.

He got to the restaurant first, pulling his scarf closer around his throat, guarding against the bracing wind that tunnelled down the block.

Thumbing his phone from his pocket, he fired off a flurry of texts to Rose.

Are you on your way?

I'm here.

Do you want me to wait outside?

And then Ilya.

Where are you? It's 7!

Rose had first suggested a trendy spot in the East Village, but he'd shot her down, much to her chagrin, explaining that it would be better to meet somewhere closer to Central Park - to the Russian Embassy - and a shorter commute for Ilya and Svetlana.

'And what about me, Shane?' She'd said, her lips curled in mock annoyance. 'I'll have to track all the way across town.'

'You'll have a car,' he said, simply. She would. Rose got driven everywhere. The perks of being a big movie star, he guessed.

'Fine,' she'd huffed, throwing herself back in her chair melodrammatically before picking up her wine glass and taking a long sip, eyeing him from over the rim. 'So, tell me about him, this Ilya.'

'You'll like him,' he said. Because what else could he say about Ilya Rozanov?

*

He and Ilya had met in college, and Shane hadn't liked him. They'd both attended the University of Chicago, where they'd been big players on the hockey team. This should've made them close. *Should've*. But there was something about the Russian that Shane couldn't quite settle in himself. Instead, they'd been more like rivals, always jostling for the best spot on the line, always seeking out the glory. They never really spoke off the ice, as they might have with other teammates. Hayden, for example, who Shane was still close with, was both his team and coursemate, hoping to use his English major to progress into sports journalism like Shane. But Ilya had been a Politics major, studying international relations, which had naturally prepared him well for his eventual career in the Russian Consulate, but not exactly put him and Shane in the same circles.

Which is why it had been especially awkward when they found themselves lumped together on a twelve-hour drive to New York after graduation. It hadn't helped that when Shane had pulled up to Ilya's dorm, the blond had his tongue down the throat of some random sorority girl, and had been so deeply enthralled in this activity that Shane had had to clear his throat twice to break the pair apart.

'Oh,' Ilya jumped. 'Hollander, you can't sneak up on people like that!' They never used their first names in those days.

'Back's open,' Shane said flatly, not biting. 'Do you want to drive the first shift?'

'No, you're already there,' Rozanov replied, circling round to the trunk and throwing four black trash bags full of his belongings in unceremoniously.

The girl, Amanda, Shane thought her name was - he'd recognised her from some varsity events - sidled around after Ilya, and Shane listened as they resumed wetly where they left off.

'Text me from the road,' he heard her say, breathless.

'I'll text you before then.' Rozanov replied, his thick Russian accent rumbling low in the back of his throat. Shane squirmed in his seat. He shouldn't have to hear this. And if he'd accidentally slipped and fallen on the horn twice in quick succession, well, that was just a coincidence.

Eventually, throwing himself into the passenger side, Rozanov's eyebrow quirked upwards as he fixed Shane with a disdainful glance. 'Is this a Jeep?'

Shane's head reared back, defensive. 'No, it's British. Practical.'

The Russian nodded, unconvinced. 'Okay.'

*

On the road, Ilya became chatty.

'Why don't you tell me the story of your life?'

Shane looked at him quizzically. 'The story of my life?'

Ilya plucked a cigarette from his pocket and lit it, too focused on his actions to notice Shane glowering at him. 'Smoking is bad for you,' he said eventually, instead.

Finally looking over, Rozanov rolled his eyes. 'It is one cigarette, Hollander.' Shane doesn't blink. 'Fine, I will roll down the window.' Taking a long drag, he resumed his earlier line of questioning. 'You know, it is eighteen-hour drive.'

'It's twelve.'

'Yes, but it will be eighteen if you keep this up.'

‘I’m driving at the speed limit!’ He protested, glancing at his dash to be sure.‘Sure, whatever, Hollander. My point is,’ he waved his hand in the air, filling the car with small whirls of smoke. ‘We may as well use this time to get to know each other a little better.’

‘Well, there’s not much to know,’ Shane sighed. ‘The story of my life isn’t even going to get us out of Chicago. Nothing has happened to me yet.’

‘So that is why you decide to go to New York? So something can happen to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Like what?’

Shane shot him a glare. ’*Like* I’m going to become a reporter.’

‘Ah,’ Rozanov nodded. ‘So you can write about things that happen to other people?’

‘God, you are such an asshole!’

‘What? And you are so nice?’ Shane could feel Ilya’s gaze burning into the side of his head, but he kept his eyes on the road. ‘Oh, I forget, you are Shane Hollander, all-star hockey player who gets perfect grades and dots his I’s with little hearts.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means you have no edge. Probably because nothing has happened yet, I suppose.’

‘I have as much edge as the next person!’

‘Sure thing, Hollander.’

Shane gripped the wheel tighter. New York couldn’t come fast enough.

*

By the end of Shane’s first shift, they’d started arguing about movies. Pulling off the highway, he idled into the parking lot of a diner, protesting Ilya’s incorrect opinion on the ending of *Wall-E*.

‘It’s hopeful!’

‘No no, Hollander. The people are all fat and have no bones left; they cannot support themselves long enough to prosper on a dirty Earth. They are all going to die, quickly. I bet the atmosphere is still unbreathable, too.’

‘They’ve found the plant in the boot, Rozanov. The credits show them starting to thrive again!’

‘That is because it is American kid’s movie. In Russia, it would be more realistic.’

‘Oh, but the robots falling in love is realistic enough for you?’

‘Well, yes. But that is different.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because people always fall in love in strange places.’

‘Right.’

Ilya turns in his seat to look at him seriously as Shane pulls into a space and turns off the engine. ‘Oh, I get it.’

‘Get what?’

‘You have never been with anyone you liked.’

Shane feels his neck go hot. ‘What?!’

‘No, it is fine, it does not make you bad person.’

‘I’ve been with plenty of people I liked.’

‘Oh yeah. Like who?’

Shane whips his seatbelt off and ducks out of the car. ‘I don’t have to take this from you.’ He marched towards the diner entrance, illuminated by a slow-blinking LED sign that advertised the best pie in the state. Behind him, Rozanov slammed his door and didn’t let the conversation drop.

‘I’m not buying it, Hollander.’

Even as they got settled in a booth inside, he didn’t relent. ‘Hollander, just give me a name, and I will let it go.’

‘I’m not going to do that, Rozanov.’

‘Fine, don’t tell me.’ Ilya releases, like a dog that finally realises he needs to give you the ball back before you can throw it. And given how it worked a charm, Shane guessed that the Russian knew how to play ball.

‘Lily.’

‘What?’ Ilya looked up from his menu, perplexed, as if he had already forgotten the conversation at hand. Which, of course, only infuriated Shane more.

‘That’s someone I liked. This girl Lily, I grew up with.’

‘Mmm, no, you didn’t.’

What?’

‘Is woman’s name.’

‘Of course it is. I like women.’ Shane knew Ilya was trying to get a rise out of him; this type of talk was common in the locker room, where the worst thing a player could be was gay. But, somehow, he thought Rozanov was above going that low one-on-one. Obviously, he’d been wrong.

‘It's okay, Hollander. It is legal in this country. You can tell the truth.’

‘You’re an asshole.’

Ilya dropped his menu on the table, bringing Shane’s eyes, which had been frantically rereading the description of the pecan pie, directly level with the Russian’s unnervingly close baby blues as Ilya leaned forward in his seat, so that Shane could smell the cigarette smoke on his clothes. ‘You know,’ he said, his mouth quirking into a rye and filthy smile. ‘This diner has motel attached if you want to start being honest with yourself.’

‘Fuck off,’ Shane snapped, ignoring the way the other man’s words stirred in his gut.

Ilya shrugged, dropping back into his side of the booth. Shane let out a shaky breath that had caught in this throat.

‘Your loss.’

Asshole.

*

Shane didn’t speak again unless spoken to. By the next morning, Rozanov had given up trying. That is, until they make it to the George Washington Bridge. By that point, Ilya was driving, so Shane could find comfort and not think about how high up they were by watching the passing of the support beams overhead in a gentle, steady rhythm.

‘You know, Hollander, I don’t think I realised how cruel you are.’ Ilya’s Russian drawl snapped him out of his daze and immediately onto the defence.

‘How’d you figure that?’ He practically snarled.

‘Well. You know English, it is not my first language, yes?’

‘Sure.’

Ilya was focused only on the road, ducking into the next lane to pass other traffic, so Shane felt he could look at the man beside him a little more freely, notice his relaxed, certain, grip on the wheel, the bob of his Adam’s Apple as he swallowed between words, the stir of his hair in the breeze from the slightly cracked window. It was no wonder he was such a ladies' man. He was quite a sight.

‘And yet you make it even more difficult for me to make a conversation in English by making me do all the talking.’

‘Sorry,’ Shane said, suddenly embarrassed. ‘I guess I’m not very chatty.’

‘Mmm,’ Rozanov agreed. ‘Perhaps even a little boring. Let’s hope life in New York is more exciting for you, yes? Liven you up a little.’

‘Asshole,’ Shane cracked a smile despite himself.

‘But, who knows,’ Ilya continued, reaching across to slap the top of Shane’s leg playfully, repeatedly. ‘Maybe boring makes good journalist.’

Shane shook his head. ‘You’d probably be good at it, actually. You have to ask a lot of questions.’

‘Oh,’ Ilya snuck him a glance, and Shane spotted a flash of his teeth out of the corner of his eye. ‘So that is it, huh? You don’t like being the one answering questions.’

‘I guess not.’ He paused, feeling a challenge rise in him, the competitive heat he had grown accustomed to on the ice when someone passed to Rozanov and not him, flickering in his stomach. ‘I guess I just don’t like opening up to people. Especially people I don’t know that well.’

‘Ouch, Hollander.’

‘What? It’s not like we’re friends, Rozanov.’

‘No?’

Shane snorted. ‘No. Hardly.’

‘That’s too bad,’ Ilya said, and though his tone held the same playful competition that Shane recognised, something in his voice made Shane feel a pang of remorse. Maybe he had gone too far. Maybe he was the asshole after all. He never did quite read these situations right.

‘You were the only person I knew in New York.’

*

They’d agreed Shane would drop Ilya off at Washington Square Park. It was as good a landmark as any, and Shane wouldn’t have much further to go, seeing as his mom had hooked him up with an apartment in Greenwich Village through an old college buddy of hers.

Pulling up under the archway, Shane took a moment to stretch in his seat, gazing out of the window at the bustling square before him, full of tourists, street performers and families. It all felt very New York.

‘Well, here we are,’ Ilya said, rolling his neck in circles and killing the engine.

‘Let me help you with your bags.’

‘I can carry my own bags, Hollander.’

‘*Rozanov*.’

‘Fine. I think valet would suit you.’

Shane let the comment roll off his back and swung himself out of the car and onto the pigeon-littered sidewalk.

Ilya somehow got a handle on all of his trash bags, which were practically bursting open with things, and Shane wasn’t sure he’d make it on the subway without leaving half of his belongings scattered across the island. But hey, maybe the great Ilya Rozanov could afford a cab. That wasn’t exactly Shane’s problem anymore. As far as he was concerned, he was never going to see that man or his questioning blue eyes again. He was, of course, very wrong.

‘Well,’ he said, extending his hand. ‘Have a nice life.’

Ilya didn’t reach for it, but rather looked at it, bemused, letting Shane’s hand sway there in the open air. Eventually, he laughed, shaking his head. ‘Bye, Hollander.’

And then he walked away. Shane quietly pretended to be outraged, to be affronted by the Russian’s fragrant lack of manners; to not take his hand. To not accept his peace offering. To have denied Shane the decency. And, though he wouldn’t admit it to himself, to rob him of knowing how it would feel to hold the other man’s palm in his.

*

Despite having been filming all the way across town, Rose arrived before Ilya and Svetlana. Shane greeted her at the door, holding it open for her so she could duck inside without being recognised. Shrugging her coat off and handing it to the star-struck front desk attendant, Rose fixed Shane with a strange mix of emotions he couldn’t quite decipher.

‘I still can’t believe I’m doing this,’ she said.

Shane thanked the attendant, passing over his own coat. ‘Ilya is one of my best friends, and *you* are one of my best friends,’ he said. ‘If you two hit it off, we can avoid doing that thing where you drift apart after one of you gets together with someone.’

‘But you and I haven’t drifted apart since I started seeing Jonathan,’ Rose protests as they reach their table. Shane held out her chair, gently squeezing her shoulder as she sat down.

Jonathan was an older, acclaimed theatre actor whom Rose had met while directing her first show last year. She’d grown tired of franchise roles and wanted to do something in theatre. Something pure. She’d managed to land Jontahan as the lead and her lover in quick succession, much to the dismay of Shane, Miles and all of their other friends, who watched as Rose dimmed her spark to run around making corners of her life in which she could squirrel away time with Jonathan, away from his wife of 20 years.

‘If Jonathan ever actually left his wife, and the two of you got married,’ Shane said soberly, taking his seat opposite her. ’I’m *sure* you and I would drift apart.’

Rose held his gaze across the table. ’He’s never going to leave her.’

‘Of course he isn’t.’

‘You’re right, you’re right, I know you’re right.’

*

Shane wasn’t exactly a nervous flyer, but he’d be the first to admit that seeing Ilya Rozanov for the first time in five years on a flight back into the city was enough to make him jumpy.

It hadn’t helped that Shane hadn’t actually *seen* Ilya at all, but rather, the Russian had stuck his hand between the aisles and tapped him on the shoulder.

'University of Chicago. Hockey team,’ he'd said, bluntly. Shane had whirled around, just about cracking his neck, to be met with the same all-seeing blue eyes that had wandered all over him years before, and the sharp cheekbones, accented by a striking mole that he had studied in return. Today, they were split into a grin, a slightly unnerving, familiar grin. ‘Hollander, right?’

‘Ilya,’ Shane said, somewhat breathlessly.

‘Hollander! I thought that was you!’

‘We’re not in college anymore. My name is Shane.’

‘Shane Hollander, right, I knew that.’

The man sat to Shane’s right, whom Ilya’s hand still floated next to, smiled, glancing between the two men. ‘Do you guys want to sit together?’

‘No,’ Shane replied quickly, at the same time Ilya said ‘Sure, thanks,’ and rose to his feet.

The seat next to him sagged as Ilya threw himself down. ‘So, Hollander, what have you been up to?’ He smelled like cigarettes.

’You smell like cigarettes.’

‘I had one, like two hours ago.’

‘It’s bad for you.’

‘What, so you have become doctor now? I thought you were going to be prize-winning author?’

‘Journalist.’ Shane glanced at Ilya for just a split second, just long enough to see a smug smile on his face. His stomach flipped. He was the same. He was exactly the same. ‘I am. A journalist that is. I write for the New Yorker, now.’

‘Oh? I read the New Yorker.’

Shane whipped his head around, surprised. Ilya's shit-eating grin had dropped. Instead, he turned the ice in a glass of vodka Shane hadn't noticed he'd been drinking. 'Really?'

'No. The New Yorker is boring.'

'Oh.' Shane hadn't realised he'd been smiling like an idiot until he felt it fall. 'My dad has always loved it.'

'Oh,' Ilya shoved his shoulder playfully. 'So being boring is… genetic?'

'Wow.. genetic.' Shane shook his head, feeling his smile return. Since when was he funny?

Shane thought he must have changed in the last five years, too. Somehow, he couldn't quite remember what had made Ilya so annoying when they'd been in college together. He found himself speaking easily to Ilya about his writing, about how it sometimes let him cover hockey, a game he still loved. Just the week before, he'd run an interview with Scott Hunter for one of his fundraising galas. Hayden had called him two days later, having picked it up on his way to work and jumped up and down at the newsstand when he'd seen Shane's name beneath the article.

Ilya told him in return about how he'd come to work as a political consultant, making use of his Russian heritage, and was working his way up in the embassy. He was currently on the final leg of a journey back from Moscow, where he'd been both working and visiting his family.

'Do you get to see them often?'

Ilya shook his head. 'My father sometimes, my brother not so much.'

'And your mother?'

'Never.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'Is okay. It's not so bad now that I live here all the time. I am only really reminded of them when I go home.'

It was all going so well until Ilya brought up romance.

'So, are you seeing anyone? I seem to remember that being a struggle for you last time?'

Shane shook his head. 'That's all you. I have no problems seeing people. You seemed to think I was gay!' Just saying it made his stomach flutter.

'Ah, so you are still in denial.'

'Oh my god, you're *still* an *asshole*!' Ilya didn't respond; he was signalling the hostess for another vodka. 'Ginger ale, please,' Shane said when she asked him what he would like.

‘So you like women?’

‘Sure.’

‘I’m really convinced, Hollander. You know, I remember how you looked at me in locker room.’

‘Shut up,’ Shane hissed. ‘I don’t have to prove anything to you.’

‘It is shame. I remember now you turned me down before.’

Shane turned in his seat, conscious of the probably pricked ears around them. The back of his neck was hot, and he was sure anyone could see his hands trembling. ’You may find this hard to believe, Rozanov, but I never considered not sleeping with you a sacrifice.’

Shane wasn’t sure why the other man’s insistence that he was gay bothered him so much. He was comfortable in his sexuality. It was probably the fact that Ilya made it so matter-of-fact, like he was saying the Earth orbited the Sun or the sky was blue. Shane Hollander was gay.

Once they landed, Shane couldn’t get off the plane fast enough.

*

It had been another two years before Shane finally reconciled some of those feelings and started sleeping with men. And another three on top of that before he saw Ilya again. Shane and Rose had been in a bookstore. She'd been looking for material to adapt so that she could start writing her first show, and Shane had just broken things off with the guy he’d been sleeping with. He’d had to use the same reason as all of his last flings. The same excuse he’d used when he’d broken things off with Rose when they’d dated briefly when she was still in drama school. It just hadn’t felt right, and besides, he hadn’t been looking to actually *date.*

This, of course, had prompted Rose to try set him up with anyone in her contacts: actor, producer, writer, or otherwise.

‘Miles would always go out with you, you know,’ she’d said when they’d been at lunch in Central Park.

‘Again, flattered, but not interested in Miles like that,’ Shane sighed.

‘Not Miles, then. You know, I’ve heard a lot about Pedro Pascal behind closed doors. If it’s someone older you want, I’m sure I can pull some strings. No judgement.’

‘Rose,’ Shane pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘I am not interested in dating anyone right now. Even if it's not publicly.’

Rose had noticed Ilya first; she was more sensitive to the increasing fanaticism of her audience and being watched in public. But she turned to him instead, whispering over her open book on the history of women’s suffrage.

‘Someone is staring at you in Personal Growth.’

Shane looked up. Ilya Rozanov stood a few feet away, lurking surreptitiously behind a bookshelf full of self-help books, and was indeed staring at him.

‘I know him,’ he murmured. ‘You’d like him, he used to be convinced I was gay too.’ He rolled his eyes.

‘He’s cute.’

‘You think he’s cute?’ Shane wrinkled his nose.

‘Why did *he* think you’re gay?’

‘I don’t know. We played hockey together in college.’

‘Oh, so you spent time with him in the showers? Yeah, I wonder why he thought that.’

‘That’s not funny,’ Shane frowned, turning to face Rose fully so there was no chance Ilya could overhear them. 'Also, I don’t think *he’s* actually gay. He’s a ladies' man. He was always a massive player on campus’

‘That was ten years ago! People change.’

‘Well, the last time I saw him, he still talked to me like we were on the ice. He never remembers my first name.’

‘Shane?’

Shane turned to face the Russian, who had walked over and now stood an arm’s length away, and who, he could now comfortably say, *was* cute. Ridiculously so. Unfairly so.

‘Hi, Ilya.’

‘Shane Hollander,’ Ilya smiled, planting a hand on Shane’s shoulder. ‘I thought that was you.’

‘It is,’ Shane said, cringing at how awkward that he was certain the uptick of his lips must’ve looked. ‘This is Rose.’ He turned to see Rose retreating down the escalator and out of the store. ‘Was Rose.’

‘That is your girlfriend?’ Ilya’s hand dropped from his shoulder.

Shane felt his eyebrows raise. ‘No. No, I mean we dated for a bit a few years back, but no, we’re just friends.’

‘Oh.’

‘How’s the embassy?’

‘Good, I actually just got back from Moscow.’ Ilya fixed his gaze on his shoes.

‘Oh, that must’ve been nice.’

‘Not so good, actually. My father - he is sick.’

‘Oh,’ Shane felt his heart hit his stomach. ‘I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, Ilya. That’s awful’

*

They became friends after that. Slow, awkward friends, but friends nonetheless. They got lunch in Chinatown, and Ilya told Shane about his father’s growing dementia symptoms and how he was torn about whether to go back and care for him or continue living his life in New York, where he felt at home. Shane told him in return about his life, writing bigger pieces for the New Yorker, how he’d covered Scott Hunter’s public coming out in a piece that had involved several long interviews with the hockey player and had helped him come to terms with the feelings dwelling in him.

‘That is great, Hollander. I’m glad you have finally relaxed.’

‘Me too,’ he smiled.

It felt like a date. But to be sure, Shane had spoken up as they’d left. ‘Would you like to get dinner with me again sometime?’

Ilya had smiled too. ‘Sure, it would be nice to have friend like you, Shane Hollander.’

And that had been that. After that, they had gone to lunch again, then a hockey game, the movies, even the theatre, and walked around museums as Shane tried to coax Ilya into an appreciation of modern art.

‘Okay, Mr Culture. Mr Highbrow.’ He’d said, his tone lilting in a way that made Shane smirk.

It had been almost grossly easy to switch off the part of him that had been attracted to Ilya, the part that *had* noticed him in the showers, had felt the burn of his hand on his leg when he had touched him in the car. They were friends. Ilya had been joking about sleeping together all those years ago. He liked women, and he loved sleeping with them, and he told Shane as much when they would hang out. He told him about some brunette he’d met at a club when they were choosing Ilya’s Christmas tree and lugging it back to his apartment, a blonde with crazy freckles when they’d been at the aquarium. And a girl who was sure to be the next big popstar when they’d been to karaoke after dinner one night.

Ilya had his own way of classifying the women he slept with. But he’d kept that under wraps until they’d been on the phone one night, each tucked up in their beds watching TV.

‘Your friend is on,’ Ilya had said.

‘What channel, please?’

‘Two.’

Shane grabbed the remote and flicked over. It was the unnecessary remake of *Casablanca* that Rose had done a few years ago to finance her lake house. Where they’d changed parts of

the script so that her character, originally played by Ingrid Bergman, had been kidnapped by the nazis. She'd been furious.

He snapped a picture of the screen as Rose was in close-up, standing on an airport runway that had actually been a greenscreen on some studio backlot. He sent her the photo, which earned him a thumbs-down reaction and nothing more.

'She looks good,' Ilya said. 'Low maintenance.'

'Low maintenance?'

'There are two types of people,' he said, matter-of-factly.

'Oh really?'

'Yes, listen.' He could hear Ilya rolling his eyes. 'High maintenance and low maintenance.'

'And Rose is low maintenance?' Shane snorted, in reality having spent an accumulation of around seventy-two hours of his life waiting for her to order in restaurants to cater specifically to her tastes before she eventually decided to just go vegan. He shot her another text: *Ilya says you're a good actor.*

?

He thinks you're low maintenance.

She sends back the middle finger emoji.

'And which am I?'

'You're the worst kind,' Ilya said quickly, as if he'd already given it plenty of thought. 'You're high maintenance, but you think you're low maintenance.'

'*Oh?'*

'Yes.'

'I don't see that.'

Ilya's laugh rattled through the phone. 'You don't see that? You correct my grammar in texts, Hollander.'

'Don't call me that.'

Ilya is silent for a moment. 'Case closed. Goodnight, Shane.'

'Goodnight, Ilya.'

*

It was only when Shane started actually dating that things got a little weird.

They'd been out at a gallery. Something classical this time, which Ilya said he could appreciate more than bananas duct-taped to walls.

Rose had set Shane up with her makeup artist, a woman. Which, he thought, would be better to make his first foray into *dating*, dating. His Mom and Dad knew he was bi, but that still didn't stop them from asking when he would settle down with a nice girl.

'Do you want to go to the movies with me tonight?' Ilya had asked, swinging his leg casually as they'd strolled into a room full of pre-raphaellites.

'Ah,' Shane said. 'I'd love to, but I actually have a date.'

'A date?' Ilya's eyebrows reached his hairline. 'So… *serious*.'

'Well, you know. We're not getting any younger. I figured it was time to get out there properly.'

'Great, that's great. Good for you, Hollander,' Ilya smiled, though it looked more like a wince; they never used their surnames anymore.

*

When that hadn't worked, Shane had progressed through more of Rose's single eligible New Yorkers' Rolodex until he had enough of going on completely blind dates and hatched a plan with Ilya to set her up with him. Ilya agreed, but only on the condition that *he* come too, and double date with his friend Svetlana, who also worked at the embassy.

'It is great, Hollander,' his voice had crackled over the phone. 'Her father is big name in hockey, you will like her.'

Shane frowned at the use of his last name. He wasn't so sure. He'd been on a lot of dates now, and still none of them had felt right. He wasn't sure what he was missing, but he was almost certain it wasn't networking opportunities. But it would make Ilya happy and get Rose away from Jonathan, even just for the evening, so he agreed.

*

Ilya and Svetlana arrived together. He wore a smart tuxedo, matching the more formal dress code, and Svetlana hung off his arm in a sparkling gold evening dress. They looked great together—the merlot they'd already ordered turned in Shane's stomach.

'If he's so great. Why hasn't she snapped him up?' Rose whispered as they approached, reading his mind.

'I told you, they've been friends for too long, it would be weird, apparently.'

'Right.' Rose didn't look convinced.

By the entrees, Shane was sure his and Svetlana's courtship was a non-starter. He'd tried talking to her about some of the recent pieces he'd managed to write about hockey. Turns out,

she did know a lot about the sport. A *lot.* And a lot of what she thought about it happened to directly contradict his thoughts, though they agreed that Scott Hunter's public coming out on the ice had been the most interesting thing to happen in hockey for a while.

After that, the conversation quickly lulled. Svetlana was great, she was gorgeous, she was nice, but there was no spark. They both knew it, and they knew it quickly.

'Would I have seen any of your movies?' He heard Ilya say from across the table.

'I don't know. Do you watch movies where girls get kidnapped a lot?' Rose joked.

'No, not really,' Ilya said, flatly.

They both took a long sip of their drinks, and suddenly the whole table was silent.

'What are we going to order?' Shane asked.

'I will have steak,' Ilya said quickly. 'Probably with lots of butter.'

Shane winced. 'Ilya, Rose is a vegan.'

Ilya nodded. 'Okay?'

'But I'm not morally superior about it, or anything,' Rose said. 'I just want to do my part to help the planet. And I do think that makes me a better person,' she winked.

'If we all thought more about each other and less about getting what we want, we'd get further in the mission of being human,' Svetlana said. She laughed, 'Someone said that in a play I saw the other day.'

'I wrote that play,' Rose said, joy spreading across her face.

'Get out of town.'

'No, I did, that's my play.'

'That's amazing, I've never quoted a play at dinner in my life,' Svetlana leaned back in her chair to laugh. 'I really don't know that much about theatre. I hardly ever go.'

'You saw it, and it resonated with you.' Rose's smile was etched onto her face like a permanent fixture. 'That means something to me.'

'That's crazy,' Svetlana giggled. 'I just went on a whim. I read a review in the New Yorker on a day off and thought I'd take a chance.'

Ilya dived in. 'Shane actually writes for the New Yorker.'

Svetlana glanced at Shane for a split second before fixing her attention back on Rose, the two of them leaning across the table, enraptured.

Shane looked at Ilya, who gazed back. A small smile played across his face.

*

After dinner, Rose pulled him to one side.

‘Listen, do you think you’re going to see Svetlana again?’ Shane shook his head. ‘Well, if you don’t, do you mind if I do?’

‘Of course not, just not tonight, okay? I don’t think it would be fair to Ilya.’

‘No, of course not. Of course not.’ Rose shook her head. ‘He seems great, Shane.’

When she’d shivered, Shane had pulled her in closer, wrapping her in his arms as Svetlana and Ilya wandered back over to them.

‘I’m going to get a cab,’ Svetlana said, and even Shane’s Canadian mind boggled at how she could stand there in no coat with her legs out like that. She really was impressive.

‘I’ll go with you.’ Rose chirps.

‘Great.’

And then they were gone, and Ilya and Shane were alone beneath a flickering streetlight, completely stood up. And they couldn’t help it. They burst into a fit of laughter.

*

It seemed like no time later that they were helping the pair move into their own apartment. Shane had heard jokes about lesbians, but *Jesus*.

Ilya spent the whole day either on the phone or avoiding it. When they were buying flowers or a housewarming present, he kept excusing himself to scream at Alexei down the phone. Something, Shane assumed, to do with his father and his worsening condition.

‘We don’t have to go if you don’t want to, Ilya,’ he’d said after they’d had to excuse themselves from a department store when Ilya couldn’t keep his voice hushed through his mounting frustration with his brother. His dad was deteriorating. Fast.

‘No,’ Ilya said, wiping a stray tear from his eye. ‘Thank you. But, I’m fine.’

He was not fine. They found Rose and Svetlana huddled around an (objectively hideous) coffee table, shaped like a wagon wheel, encased in glass.

‘I like it,’ Rose said. ‘I got it from a friend who was a propmaster, and it makes it feel like home to me.’

‘Okay,’ Sventala said calmly, before finding a place in Rose’s arms. ‘We’ll let Ilya and Shane be the judge.’

Ilya stood by the window, gazing out at the street. ‘Is nice.’ He hadn’t looked at it once.

‘Shane, what do you think?’ Rose asked. He met her eye and shook his head wordlessly. ‘I just don’t get what is so awful about it,’ she protested.

Svetlana plants a kiss on her lips. ‘Case closed.’

‘Seriously?’

‘If we had extra rooms, you could have whatever nonsense from sets you like, my love.’

‘Hold on, nonsense?’

Shane winced.

‘You know, my parents used to sound like this, too,’ Ilya said, coming away from the window finally.

Svetlana sucked in a sharp breath. ‘Hoo boy.’

‘It all sounds sweet until you start fighting and arguing about who makes what choices. And then, all of a sudden, you’re fighting to keep this ugly coffee table. This hideous, Roy Rodgers, garage sale, coffee table!’

The room goes still. Shane watched a vein pulse in his friend’s neck.

‘I thought you liked it?’ Rose murmured.

‘I was being nice!’

Shane shot them an apologetic look as Ilya stormed out. ‘It’s his dad,’ he said.

*

He found Ilya on the stoop, a cigarette between his fingers.

‘I know. I shouldn’t be smoking,’ he said, and, as Shane opened his mouth. ‘And I shouldn’t have yelled.’

‘Ilya,’ he sighed. ‘Why didn’t you just go home?’

The other man sniffed. ‘I was trying to put on brave face.’

‘You don’t need to pretend for us, not if it's going to make you feel like this.’

‘Oh really? I thought you all liked me when I was being abrasive asshole?’ He snapped.

‘Don’t take this out on me. It’s not my fault you wanted to try and brute force your way through your father’s death!’

It was like Shane had slapped him. It was one thing to be aware of what was happening, and another to say it out loud, as plainly as that. Shane could feel the tears in his eyes, though he willed them not to fall.

‘No?’ Ilya said quietly, letting smoke fill his lungs before breathing out. ‘Because you have always processed things so well, Hollander.’

‘Don’t call me that.’ Shane’s fists shook. The acrid smoke filled his nostrils, stinging his eyes.

‘It is your name.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘What? You are poster child for burying feelings, no?’

Shane turned away, marching down the block, though he didn’t know where. ’I don’t have to take this crap from you.’

But Ilya is on his heels. ‘If you are so put together, why have you not gone on more than one date with anyone?’

Shane whirled around, facing a tear-riddled Ilya. ‘I see people!’

‘See people.’ Ilya scoffed. ‘Do you want to be with someone? Have you even slept with anyone new?’

‘Ilya, you’re going to have to move back to Russia, because you’re going to have fucked everybody in New York and I don’t see that solving all your problems for you!’ Ilya opened his mouth to respond, but Shane wasn’t done. ‘Besides, I will settle down with someone when it feels right, not when I find the first person who shows an interest in me.’

‘You don’t need to look far to find someone interested in you, Hollander.’

Shane laughed bitterly. ‘Don’t call me that, Ilya.’

Ilya stilled, letting his cigarette fall to the floor. ‘Are you finished?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I say something?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am sorry,’ and all at once, Ilya is hugging him, and he could smell him, all of him, beneath the ash and smoke; something minty and earthy. Shane let himself hug him back, burying his nape in Ilya’s neck and breathing in to smother his tears.

'I'm sorry too,' he sniffed.

Wordlessly, they broke apart, and Ilya led him inside. Or attempted to, as Rose crashed through the door, swinging the wagon wheel coffee table between her legs.

‘Don’t say a word,’ she said.

*

After that, they'd both dated other people. Shane had finally let Rose set him up with Miles, and Ilya had started seeing Emily, a pastry chef who was apparently some young prodigy. It hadn't helped that she was beautiful.

He liked Miles. His mom and dad liked Miles. He liked Miles so much that he started to realise that perhaps he hadn't been bi after all, and that the potential for romantic feelings to bloom between them made him realise he liked fucking men, being with them, and he thought he'd like to marry the right one; and he liked being friends with women. But he hated the idea of giving Ilya the satisfaction of knowing that he had correctly nailed him as gay back in college, so he kept the journey and discovery of his sexuality to himself.

They'd all gone to Rose and Svetlana's around Thanksgiving, where he and Ilya had been lumped on the same team for Pictionary, where Shane struggled to draw anything recognisable. If he hadn't been so competitive, he would've admitted that hearing Ilya repeatedly yelling 'baby's breath' for his drawing of 'baby talk', while Rose added absurdities like "baby fish mouth,' was hysterical.

Afterwards, Svetlana took Ilya away to talk about work in the den, and Shane told himself he could ignore something wince in him when he saw Ilya kiss the prodidgy before he left. She was just so young. But then Miles was there, telling him that, no, his drawing had been spot on.

'That's a baby,' he said, pointing to one set of squiggles. 'And that's clearly talking,' he said, pointing to another. 'You're wonderful.' And Shane let himself melt into his kiss.

Then Rose needed more hands in the kitchen, making coffee, so he left Miles chatting to their friends in the other room.

'Emily is a little young for Ilya, don't you think?' He said, shutting the door behind him.

Rose stamped down on her coffee granules. 'Sure, she's young, but look what she's done.'

'What has she done?' Shane said, lifting the lid on the box of cakes Emily had made for the party. 'She makes desserts.'

'She makes thirty-five hundred chocolate mousse pies a *week*!'

'Wait.' Shane paused. 'Emily is *Aunt* Emily?!' He screwed up his face. Beside him, Rose had begun to froth milk. 'Ilya doesn't even *like* sweets.'

'I'm so glad you finally agreed to give Miles a chance!' Rose called over the noise.

'I know! Me too. Nothing serious yet, but-'

'But it could get there, right?'

'Right.'

*

Shane didn't usually stay up late. It wasn't his style. But the night Ilya called, he'd been on a roll trying to finish a piece that just refused to let him go. So, when his phone buzzed with Ilya's number past midnight, he was pleasantly surprised, if a little concerned.

'Hello?'

'Are you alone?'

'Yeah, I was just finishing up an article.'

'Could you come over?'

'What's the matter?'

'He's dying.'

Shane was already putting on his sneakers. 'I'll be right there.'

Ilya answered the door remarkably composed.

'Hi.' His voice was steady, though he looked like he'd been working out, his muscles swelling beneath a tank top and shorts. If Shane didn't know him so well, he wouldn't have known anything was wrong. But he did, so he noticed the nervous grinding of his fingernails, the chewing of the inside of his mouth, and the immense sadness in his wide eyes.

'Ilya.'

'Come in.' He followed Ilya through to his bedroom, where he'd left a smoking ashtray crammed full of cigarette butts. 'Don't say anything.'

'I wasn't going to. I wouldn't. Are you okay?'

'Yes,' he sniffed. 'I am sorry to call so late.'

'Don't be stupid, I want to be there for you. If I can.' Ilya nodded, swallowing thickly. 'What happened?'

Ilya flopped down on the bed, hunched over himself as if trying to disappear. He seemed so tiny, vulnerable in a way Shane had never seen him; as if he were suddenly very mortal. Shane supposed that's what death did to people.

'Alexei called. He is gone.'

'Oh, Ilya. I'm so sorry,' Shane lifted the ashtray from the bed (fire hazard) and placed it on the dresser. Crossing the room, he cracked open the window and swapped the main light for a desk lamp, making the space feel a little calmer.

‘It is fine. Before now, I think I made peace with it: the fact that he would die.’ He smiled weakly.

‘And now?’ Shane asked, turning to face him, shaky himself.

‘Now I am not sure what I am going to do.’

The tears began to fall, as if sprung from some giant well in Ilya that neither of them had known existed, but now seemed to be all he was made of. He shook with it, the racking grief. Shane grabbed him in his arms before he knew what he was doing, as if by instinct, to stop him falling to pieces. He wasn’t sure how long he held him, but when Ilya eventually surfaced for air, Shane’s shoulder was sodden.

‘I can’t believe I didn’t go back for him. I didn’t try to see him, to look after him myself. I just stayed here, hiding like coward.’

‘No, Ilya, that’s not true, you’re not a coward.’

‘I am. I take the easy way. Let Alexei deal with him, telling myself that as long as I am sending money back home, it makes things okay.’

Shane didn’t know what else to say. So he just held him.

‘Can you stay with me tonight?’ Shane felt the words rumble through his own chest, held closely to Ilya’s.

‘Of course.’

So, he let himself slide into bed next to Ilya, wrapping himself in the sheets and surrounding himself with that outdoorsy mint scent he’d grown accustomed to. Ilya pulled him closer, back into an embrace, and Shane held his head against his friend’s chest, his breath reaching a harmony with Ilya’s steady heartbeat. They didn’t move for a while; Shane didn’t dare. He wasn’t sure if Ilya was still crying. He was torn from his daze when Ilya moved his hands down his back, grazing his hands, which were freezing, across a patch of exposed skin where Shane's shirt had ridden up. Shane cursed himself as soon as he heard the startled yelp escape without warning, and he began to vibrate as Ilya’s sudden laughter rocked through him.

‘You’re cold,’ he whined.

‘Sorry,’ Ilya said, gasping for air. Then he did it again, deliberately holding his frozen palm against Shane’s bare waist. Shane couldn’t help but let out the same noise again, louder, this time jerking his whole body involuntarily so he lay flat on his back, but still encased in Ilya’s arms. Ilya’s head rolled back as he shook with another cackle. And Shane, despite himself, let out a chuckle of his own.

‘You’re an asshole.’

They fell asleep like that, in the quiet dark, wrapped by an unsteady sea of emotions, their dreams floating on a tide of grief and companionship that seemed to bond them closer than ever.

When he woke, Shane found himself staring at the back of Ilya's neck, marked and red from sleep. He held him closer, still half asleep himself, finding an ease that seemed completely natural, and planted a slow kiss on the back of his friend's neck. He woke several more times that morning, each time, finding Ilya still asleep in different positions, his face peaceful, his arms curled under his pillow, and each time, he peppered small, comforting kisses against what he could reach of Ilya's skin. His neck, his shoulder, his cheek. His nose, his forehead.

'Mmm, morning,' he flicked his eyes up to find Ilya gazing back at him softly, still glazed with sleep.

'Morning,' he smiled, dropping a kiss on Ilya's collarbone. Ilya lowered his head into Shane's hair, leaving a gentle peck of his own at his crown. 'How do you feel?'

'Okay, I think,' he felt Ilya smile into his hair. 'Better now you are here.'

'Hey,' he lifted his head, letting his eyes meet Ilya's again, relaxing as he felt the other man's hand slide down the back of his neck and rest there. 'Of course.'

They were close now. Close enough that Ilya's breath stirred Shane's eyelids. That he could feel the pounding of Ilya's heart as he leaned in and kissed him. Shane didn't hesitate, letting Ilya's tongue seek out his mouth immediately, as his whole body sighed into the kiss for a moment, and he kissed back. And back, and back, until it became desperate, breathless, ragged. And then he was on top of Ilya, and he couldn't get close enough. And Ilya was moaning into his mouth as his hands roamed Shane's back frantically, pushing his shirt up his body until Shane had to pull away, rising up to pull the damn thing *off*.

He looked down at him then, Ilya, with his hands resting at Shane's waist, his arms resting on Shane's thighs, which bracketed the Russian's torso. His blue eyes, usually calm and inquisitive, were blown wide. His mouth agape, breathing deeply, a stupid smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He had to kiss him. He had to kiss him all over, his neck, behind his ear, down his collarbone, until he felt rough hands pull him towards him and back towards his mouth, letting out a sharp breath that seemed to demand more, to curse the fact that Shane had kept their lips apart.

He felt it then, as Ilya inched closer, the press of his morning wood against Shane's thigh. He ground his hips against it, letting his own hard cock press against Ilya's, shivering as a ripple of pleasure shot through him. His friend's breath hitched; Shane kissed him through it, pressing harder into him, and letting his hands search beneath the sheets for it.

'Fuck, Hollander,' Ilya moaned as Shane slid down his legs, pulling the Russian's shorts with him and nuzzling his face into Ilya's dick, rock hard beneath his boxers. He mouthed at it, wanting to savour the moment before he would expose Ilya completely, where he would drink him in, make him feel good, and hopefully make him gag. 'You're killing me, Hollander,' Ilya panted.

'Don't call me that, Rozanov,' Shane growled, hearing his matching breathlessness hang in the air.

Ilya chuckled, his head falling back against the pillow.

Shane only teased him for a split second more before pulling Ilya's waistband back and letting his cock spring against his cheek. He swallowed it down, trailing his tongue along the skin at the underside of Ilya's dick, pulling a string of Russian curse words from him. He increased his pace then, letting his hand join his efforts as he worked Ilya's cock up and down, filling the room with wet moans. Letting the back of his throat fill with saliva, he pushed deeper so that all of Ilya's cock filled his mouth, and he could bury his nose in his thick, happy trail.

'Jesus, fuck.'

Pulling back completely, out of breath, Shane released him with a pop. 'He won't help you,' he smirked.

Ilya leaned forward, his hand cradling Shane's face in its entirety. Shane instinctively pushed into it, kissing his palm from the side of his mouth, startling slightly as Ilya reached up, and held his gaze as he wiped a tear that he hadn't realised had welled up in the corner of his eye.

'Come here,' he said softly.

'You come here,' Shane grinned.

'No, you come here.' Ilya pulled him back in, kissing him again. Shane moaned as hands tightened around the nape of his neck, squeezing all of the remaining breath from him as Ilya growled into his mouth. 'Get up here.'

Biting down lightly on Ilya's bottom lip, Shane stayed stuck to Ilya as he crawled up the bed, peeling the rest of his clothes off until he was naked before his former rival. It was Ilya who broke them apart then.

'God, you are so pretty.'

'Shut up.'

'No is true. You look very pretty right now, Hollander. Makes me want to eat your ass.'

Shane is sure his brain stopped working for a second. He could only make out Ilya's shit-eating grin, framed beneath his unfairly kept hair, somehow only lightly ruffled with sleep. He didn't have to tell Shane twice. In a matter of seconds, he had crawled around so that he and Ilya now faced the same way, and rocked back on his knees so that he could ease back onto Ilya, who buried his face into Shane's ass, tearing into it with his mouth like it was his last meal. Shane rocked back, leaning behind him to hold his cheeks open so that Ilya's tongue could go deeper and deeper. Ilya paused, nipping the inside of his cheek lightly with his teeth before pausing to let out a shaky breath onto Shane's wet hole. The contrast of the cooler salvia and Ilya's breath was electric, sending a wave of pleasure rippling through Shane's entire body, right to the top of his head, jolting him back to look at the ceiling behind closed eyes.

'Oh, *fuck.'*

‘Ah, you like that, Hollander?’ Ilya smirked before biting into Shane’s left cheek and sucking so hard Shane was sure it would leave a lasting mark.

‘Fuck, of fucking course I do.’

Ilya lets out a half growl, half moan, as he continues. Shane leaned down to where Ilya’s hard, beautiful cock bounced in the air beneath him, slick and dewy with precum and took him in his mouth again, running his tongue over the head of his dick until he could taste him, moaning around him and tracing down the shaft with his mouth until he could lick a clean stripe down the centre of Ilya’s balls.

‘Christ,’ he heard Ilya mumble from behind him. ‘If you keep that up, I’m going to-‘

Shane continued working him with his hand until he felt Ilya’s legs begin to tremble beneath him. Then he released quickly and lurched forward off the bed.

‘Fuck, no, come back!’ Ilya jerked towards him immediately.

‘No,’ Shane said, turning and flashing Ilya a shit-eating grin of his own. ‘Your turn.’ He crawled back up the bed, seizing Ilya by the ankles and hauling them over his head, resting the Russian’s legs over his shoulder so his ridiculously peachy ass was staring him directly in the face.

‘You still want?’ He said, meeting Ilya’s wide eyes over the top of his dick.

‘I still want.’

And that was all Shane needed to lick a line between Ilya’s cheeks, finding his hole quickly and letting his tongue slide inside. Opening and closing his mouth, he picked up the pace, tonguing Ilya with the appetite of a starved coyote.

‘Oh my god,’ Ilya moaned, breathless. ‘*Fuck!’*

Shane knew he was a good ass-eater; he’d had some pretty good feedback, but he had never, *never*, been presented with a three-course meal like Ilya’s before. Pulling back, he spat, letting his saliva land on Ilya’s quivering hole before diving back in until his mouth was wet with his own spit, Ilya’s trembling ass pressing flush against Shane’s cheekbones so that he was as deep inside as he could be. He glanced up occasionally, checking to see if Ilya was okay. He was. Every time Shane looked, past Ilya’s hard cock and perfect pecs, he saw his blissed out face, either gazing at Shane in disbelief or rolled back into the pillow. Shane let his hands fall from around Ilya’s waist, grabbing for both of their cocks with each of his hands, jerking them both off.

‘Fuck, Hollander. I want to cum.’

Shane paused. ‘You can.’

‘No,’ Ilya shook his head. ‘You too. Come.’ He jerked his neck back, beckoning Shane to him. He obliged, crawling up the bed to kneel between Ilya’s splayed legs so that their cocks

were level. Ilya leant forward, reaching high with his mouth to find Shane in a deep kiss before tilting his head down to let a globe of spit fall between them onto their dicks.

Taking them both in his hand, Ilya rubbed them together, moving his hips in tandem, rocking back and forth to create a delicious friction that made Shane's head scramble.

'Fuck, keep going,' he said. He let his head fall, pressing his forehead into Ilya's and watching the slide of their cocks below, panting as he felt a familiar warmth grow in the base of his stomach.

'*Fuck*, Shane.'

'Ilya.'

His orgasm shot through Shane like a bullet train, tearing several hot bursts of cum, one after another, from him, in unison with Ilya so that both of their chests, stomachs and even necks were streaked with white. Shane trembled, stars flashing behind his eyelids. All he could hear was his heartbeat in his ears and behind it, the quivering breath of Ilya, who had slumped forward into him and was pressing kisses into his chest. When he returned to Earth, the room had stilled, suddenly chilled by the open window that rustled the curtain behind them. Aching slightly, Shane extracted himself, peeling off of Ilya and fleeing to the bathroom to clean off.

He perched precariously on Ilya's toilet basin, unfurling a roll of T.P and scrubbing the evidence from his belly. His eyes roamed the room, suddenly seeing the whole apartment, which he had been in a million times, in a new light. It was all so, *Ilya*. The smell of it, his chewed-up toothbrush on the counter, the practically empty crumpled tubes of shampoo and hair mousse still clinging on for dear life. The ashtray on the side of the tub, where he could now vividly and anatomically-accurately imagine the Russian soaking after a long day, on the phone to him or Svetlana in one hand, a cigarette resting lazily in the other.

He had to get out of there.

When he returned, Ilya searched his face, quizicaly.

'That was-'

'Very hot,' Ilya said, simply.

'You're not gay,' is all he could manage to say.

'No, I am bisexual.'

Huh?

'But you… You never.'

'What,' Ilya grabbed a Kleenex and wiped what was left of him and Shane off his chest. 'Dated guys?'

'Yeah.'

‘Neither did you.’

‘But you knew I was gay.’

‘You never asked.’

Shane stepped back. ‘So, it’s *my* fault?!’

‘Is no one’s *fault*, Hollander.’

‘I should go.’

Ilya looked down. ‘If that is what you want.’

‘I mean, I have work.’

‘Right.’

Shane edged back towards the bed and picked up his clothes, leaving a tentative kiss on Ilya’s forehead. ‘But, we should have dinner this week.’

‘Sure, that sounds nice.’

‘Okay. Great.’ He pulled his shirt on last. ’Are you going to be okay?’

Ilya nodded and picked up the comforter, throwing it back over himself. ‘I will call Svetlana.’

‘You’re not going to tell her?’

‘About my father?’

‘No,’ Shane shook his head. ‘About us.’

‘Of course not, Shane. Not if you don’t want me to.’

*

Shane wasn’t sure what he wanted. He’d wandered a couple of blocks in a sort of daze until he felt far enough away from the Russian and his wide, searching eyes to breathe again, and had dived into a small diner to call Rose. She picked up after three rings, the rustling of sheets clearly audible before she spoke.

‘No one I know would call this early.’ Svetlana’s accent was laced with sleep.

‘Shane?’ Rose sounded genuinely concerned. He felt terrible.

‘I’m sorry to call so early.’

‘Are you alright?’

‘I needed to talk to you.’

Rose took a breath. ‘Hold on.’

Shane drummed the fingers of his free hand on the table in front of him, trying to ignore the other early-morning diners clattering around him. After a moment of silence, the familiar slow squeaking of Rose’s sliding screen door crackled through the receiver. He could picture her now, leaning against her balcony, wrapped up in her dressing gown, the brisk fall air stirring her hair gently. When she spoke again, it was so softly that it almost made Shane weep. ‘What happened?’

‘I did something terrible.’

‘What did you do?’

He dropped his head on the table, so his words came out muffled. ’I feel awful’

The door squeaked again: Svetlana. ‘Ilya’s father,’ she whispered, loud enough for Shane to still hear. Rose’s breath came sharply.

‘Shane.’

‘I know. He called me last night. I went over.’

‘And? Is he okay?’

The door rattled as Svetlana stepped back inside, no doubt waved away by Rose.

‘I think so. He was upset, obviously. He asked me to stay with him.’

‘And did you?’

‘Yeah.’

If Shane didn’t know better, he would think Rose’s tone was becoming impatient. ’That doesn’t sound so awful, Shane.’

‘That’s not it.’ He took a deep breath, filling his nostrils with the stench of burned coffee. ‘I was comforting him, trying to make him feel better, so we slept in the same bed.’

‘Okay, that’s not so bad. Friends share beds.’

He slid back in his seat, burying his head in his hands. ’Do friends fuck in the morning?’

Rose was silent. ‘Not typically,’ she said eventually, her voice careful, slow and deliberately placing one word in front of the other. Wow, her media training had paid off. ‘Shane,’ she continued. ‘Where are you now?’

‘A diner a few blocks away.’

‘You left him?’

‘I had to. It was too weird.’

‘Because of Miles?’

Shit. Shane hadn’t even considered Miles.

‘Fuckkkkkkk.’

‘I mean, you guys weren’t… *official*, right?’

‘Right.’

A waitress who had been edging closer to Shane’s table, eyeing him up suspiciously, finally shot him a glare. Was he going to order anything? He wasn’t, so he rose to his feet sheepishly and shuffled out into the brisk morning air.

‘I don’t think it's so bad,’ Rose continued in his ear. ‘We’ve been saying you should for ages. It’s like killing two birds with one stone.’ Shane checked his watch. He had time to go home and change before work, if he hurried. ‘How was it?’

‘The during part was good… really good. But then I freaked out.’ His brain caught up to what Rose had said. ‘You knew he was bi?’

Rose sighed. ‘Shane, everyone knows he’s bisexual. We’ve met him. We’ve seen him around-‘

A taxi cut someone up on the road next to Shane, sending a blast of horn ripping through the street.

‘I feel so bad,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry. Do you want to come over for breakfast?’

Shane shook his head. ’No, I’ve got to get to work. I think I’m getting sick.’ He sniffed, as if to prove his point.

‘Okay. I’ll call you later. I love you.’

‘Love you too.’

The line went dead.

*

They agreed on a small Italian spot near Shane’s apartment for dinner that week. It was simple. They knew the servers by name at this point. They always teased Ilya about how much Parmesan he wanted on his pasta. He’d watch gleefully as they piled and piled it on, the staff growing more and more incredulous as he told them to keep going. The last few times they’d been, the owner had joked about needing to reinforce the doors to the back, in case Ilya decided he needed to take some home and tried to make off with their whole stock of cheese.

Shane deliberated what to wear until the room around him had gotten dark. What clothes said: ‘I still care about you, and I really, really enjoyed having sex with you, but I immediately felt so suffocated and safe with you that I need to run away from you forever - but let’s stay friends’?

He decided a suit was not the way to go and opted for his trusty brown jacket and some black jeans. He just hoped Ilya would let him say his piece first.

He’d let Miles down gently and not told him the whole truth. Luckily, he’d gotten quite practised at this, a skill that would surely come in handy again in about thirty minutes. He’d given him his usual spiel about not looking for anything serious right now, even though he had. But then he’d tasted serious. He’d felt the gravity of it when he’d lain in Ilya’s bed, smelled him around him, tasted him, felt his tears soak into his shirt and his skin. When he’d kissed him with all of the weight of over twelve years of history, and five years or so of denying what had felt right. Safe. Impossible.

And so, despite what he’d felt, his stomach didn’t calm, his nausea didn’t subside, until he blurted out his pre-rehearsed speech at dinner and heard Ilya say back:

‘I’m so glad you think so, too.’

Shane’s shoulders relaxed. ‘I’m not saying it wasn’t great.’

‘It was.’

‘We just never should have done it. Especially after…’

Ilya swallowed thickly and nodded.

After that, they ate their house salads quickly and silently until they could pay the bill and leave in a hurry.

*

Shane gave him some space after that, spending a lot of time instead haunting Svetlana and Rose’s apartment and helping Rose pick decorations for the lakehouse, where the pair would be hosting Svetlana’s family for Christmas.

‘Maybe it just gets past a certain point in a relationship where it’s too late to have sex,’ Shane said, picking up a snowglobe containing the Empire State Building and shaking it so that it danced with tiny paper snowflakes.

‘Sure, Shane,’ Rose said, sidestepping a gaggle of screaming toddlers running rampant through the aisles, barely contained by their nannies. God, Shane hated shopping on the West Side.

‘Is Ilya bringing anyone to your party?’

‘No,’ Rose shook her head, dropping some overrpriced candycanes into her basket. They’d decided to host ‘friendsmas’ at her place before she and Svetlana left for New England.

‘Is he seeing anyone?’

‘He was seeing this girl from the office, I think. But…’ she shrugged, offhandedly, focused more on the shelves in front of her.

Shane pulled his hat further down onto his head, trying to block out the racket from the shop around them. ‘What does she look like?’

‘Thin, pretty. Big tits.’ She turned her head to look at him. ‘Your basic nightmare.’

*

Shane arrived at the party late, compensating with an outrageously fancy bottle of wine he handed to Rose in the kitchen. She barely noticed - she was more pressingly concerned with not burning her enormous nut roast.

He’d hoped the fact that Rose would surely invite enough people to fill a small auditorium would help him avoid any awkwardness, but he found himself spending all of dinner ducking glances from Miles at one end of the long table that Rose had set out in the living room, and stealing glances at Ilya, who was pointedly *not* looking at him on the other end.

Luckily, by the time they moved the table to one side to create a dancefloor later into the evening, he’d had enough glasses of wine to remember that he and Miles had a common interest: Rose.

‘She looks great, doesn't she?’ Miles said, as they rubbed shoulders convivially, gazing across the room to where Rose was swaying contentedly in Svetlana’s arms, beaming up at her.

‘I’ve never seen her look so happy,’ Shane agreed.

‘Now,’ Miles hip-checked him, playfully. ‘What are we going to do about *you*?’ He followed Miles’ eyes to where Ilya stood at the other end of the room, alone, his arms folded, but looking right back at Shane.

‘Go and talk to him,’ Miles patted Shane’s back, to which he shook his head emphatically. ‘*Go*, Shane.’

So he did, deliberating for the entirety of what felt like an excruciatingly drawn-out walk across the dancefloor, what he would possibly say to Ilya when he reached him.

He landed on ‘Hi.’

Great work, Hollander.

‘Hello,’ Ilya said flatly, not meeting his gaze. God, he looked great.

‘Nice party,’ Shane said, instead, deciding that that was an inside thought.

‘Yes. Is great. Very fancy.’

Shane sighed. This was going to be hard work. ‘I struggle with the holidays,’ he said. ‘Every year I just try and get from the day before Thanksgiving to the day after New Year’s.’

‘A lot of suicides,’ Ilya said, his steely glare fixed ahead until Svetlana notices him and gives him a smile, which he enthusiastically returns.

‘How’ve you been?’ Shane tried again.

‘Fine.’

‘Are you seeing anybody?’

Ilya finally faced him. ‘Shane, I do not want to talk about this.’

‘Talk about what?’

‘I do *not.* Want. To talk. About it,’ he said, pacing towards the kitchen. When Shane doesn't move, he spins around, waving his arms exasperatedly, beckoning for him to follow.

‘C’mon, Ilya, we can get past this. Are we going to carry this thing around forever?’

‘*Forever?’* Ilya’s voice rose as he crossed the threshold to the kitchen, sending the few people chatting inside scurrying out past Shane. ‘It *just* happened!’

‘It was three weeks ago,’ Shane said. And it was. Ilya just looked at him like he was insane. So he continued, hoping to help his friend would see things his way, so that they could go back to normal like they’d agreed: pretending this never happened. ‘You know how a year to a person is like three years to a dog?’

Ilya held his hands up. ‘Wait, wait. Is one of us supposed to be *dog* in this scenario?’

Shane nods.

He’d never heard Ilya so outraged. ‘*Who?* Who is dog?!*’* Shane waited for the the penny to drop. ‘I am? I am the dog?!'

Shane nodded again, sending Ilya into an almost blind rage, opening and shutting cabinets frantically, rooting around until he found Svetlana’s vodka stash.

‘I don’t see that, Hollander,’ he said, unscrewing the cap and pouring himself a glass until the spirit sloshed over the sides. ‘If anyone is dog, it is you.’ He took a heavy gulp before he resumed. ‘You want to act like what happened didn't mean anything!’

‘I’m not saying it didn’t mean anything,’ Shane said.

‘No, you should know that better than anyone,’ Ilya hissed. ‘Because as soon as it happens, you walk out the door.’

‘I didn’t walk out.’ Shane’s shoes suddenly became very interesting.

‘No, sprinted is more like it,’ Ilya said bitterly, pushing past him and into the living room, where the music had stopped.

Svetlana had called everyone to attention and was raising her glass. ‘I’d like to propose a toast,’ she said. ‘To Shane and Ilya.’ Shane was dumbstruck. ‘If Rose or I found either of them even a little attractive, we wouldn’t be here today.’

Their friends laughed and applauded, raising their glasses and toasting. ’To Shane and Ilya!’

Ilya took a deep drink of his vodka, glaring ahead.

*

Ilya’s voicemail was taunting Shane. He’d spent the days leading up to and following Christmas trying to get a hold of his friend and apologise for his behaviour; all of it.

But every time he tried, he was met with the same two blunt sentences before he was forced to leave another sickeningly grovelling tirade.

Hi, this is Ilya. I will never listen to your message.

‘He obviously doesn’t want to talk to me,’ he said to Rose, after she’d finally relented and called him from the lakehouse to talk him off a ledge.

‘Just give him time,’ she sighed.

‘No, if he wants to speak to me, he’ll reach out. I’m not calling him again.’

Shane texted him the next day thirty-two times until Ilya eventually called him, practically snarling down the phone.

‘I am trying to work, Hollander. I will block your number.’

‘Hi.’

‘Hi.’

Shane hadn’t planned this far.

‘What do you want, Shane?’

He flopped down on his bed. ‘Nothing, nothing. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. And I am sorry… for running out.’

‘Okay.’

He wasn’t sure what to say next. All the times he had pictured this, Ilya had continued the conversation, and they’d slipped back into an easy camaraderie again. But that didn’t happen. Instead, they were silent until Ilya eventually spoke up. ‘I have to go, Shane.’

‘Wait, wait,’ Shane suddenly thought, ‘What are you doing for New Year’s? Are you going to Hayden’s party, because we said if we didn’t have anyone to go with, we’d go together.’

Ilya took a deep breath, and Shane could picture him on the other end, frowning, his forehead crinkled, moles dancing across his expressive face as it danced through several degrees of exasperation.

‘I’m not doing this with you, Shane. Goodbye.’

The line clicks, and Shane is left alone again.

*

Vodka was a great New Year’s companion, Shane decided. Those Russians did have the right idea. He sat alone in his apartment, watching hockey. His parents had called earlier, clearly worried about him, after he told them he was staying in and would probably be in bed before midnight. What was so wrong with that? Anderson Cooper and Andy Cohen were already drunk at 7:30? What was so bad about his following suit?

His phone lit up. It was Rose.

Are you really not coming? Hayden is asking after you.

He ignored it. A moment later, it flashed again.

Svetlana convinced Ilya to come

He flipped his phone face down and went back to his box of thin mints.

His phone buzzed again: Rose.

Shane.

Fuck this, he was going for a walk.

*

This was better. He had the streets to himself. Much nicer than going to a crowded party and pretending to have a good time. Plus, it was the perfect opportunity to catch up on his window shopping, he thought, scanning the displays for something to grab for his mom before they came to visit in the new year.

But he wasn’t alone. Someone laughed behind him, sending him spinning round to see a couple across the street: one man gazing lovingly into his boyfriend’s eyes, giggling at something he said. They seemed so happy, so content, so at ease. Curse Greenwich Village.

He wandered for a little longer, not really paying attention to where his feet were carrying him, until he stood beneath the Washington Square Arch: the spot where he and Ilya had first parted ways all of those years ago.

What was he doing? Was he really going to let them part ways for good now? Even if just as a friend, he had to salvage something. But did he want to be Ilya's friend? Did he want to see him kiss someone else? Hell, fall in *love* with someone else? Did *he* want to kiss someone else? Fall in love with someone else? And that was it. He didn't want to fall in love with anyone else. He was already in love with Ilya.

As soon as he knew that, he also knew he would have to be quick to get to Hayden's before midnight.

*

He was out of breath by the time he made it to Hayden's. Luckily, he had plenty of time to compose himself in the lift as he rode up to the fifteenth floor.

'Shane!' Hayden was drunk. 'You made it!'

'Is Ilya still here?'

'What?' Hayden swayed on his feet. 'Sure, somewhere. What took you so long? It's almost midnight!'

'Thanks, Hay,' Shane patted his friend on the shoulder and entered the room, scanning the busy party for a tousled mass of blond hair.

When he found it, he saw that its owner's big blue eyes were already fixed on him. But he was done hesitating. Shane marched towards him, watching as Ilya steeled himself.

He knew well enough now that Ilya wouldn't try to speak to him first, so he just opened his mouth and let everything he'd been turning in his head over and over all night spill out of his mouth.

'I've been doing a lot of thinking,' he began, to which Ilya's eyebrow quirked up. 'And, the thing is… I love you.'

'What?' Ilya's other brow joined the first.

'I love you,' Shane said again.

'How do you expect me to respond to this?'

Shane clasped his hands together to stop them from shaking. 'How about you love me too?'

'How about I'm leaving?' Ilya tried to push past him, but Shane was tired of running.

'Wait, Ilya, I mean it.'

'I'm sorry, Shane. I know you're lonely, I know it is New Year's Eve-' As if on cue, the countdown started around them, rippling through the crowd. It would soon be a new day. 'But you can't just show up here, tell me you love me, and expect that to make everything all right.' He paused before walking away. 'It doesn't work this way.'

Shane gathered all that was left of his shaky breath.

'Five, four, three, two, one.'

He grabbed Ilya's shoulder, and the Russian's eyes met his, brimming with tears. 'Well, how does it work?'

'I don't know, Hollander, but not this way.'

Shane shook his head, feeling tears well in his eyes, too.

Happy New Year!

Around them, their friends set off party poppers and confetti cannons, but Shane and Ilya, as always, only really had eyes for each other.

'Well, how about this way… I love that you never get cold, and you're still wearing shorts when it's freezing out. I love that you never let me win at anything, because of course, if I lose to anyone, it has to be you. I love that you get a little crinkle in your nose when you're looking at me like I'm crazy. I love that after I spend a day with you, I can still smell you on my clothes. And I love that you are the first person I want to tell anything and the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night.' He laughs then, realising how ridiculously in love with Ilya he is, has always been. 'And it's not because I'm lonely, and it's not because it's New Year's Eve.'

Ilya's brow crinkled. He was surely certain now that Shane was clinically insane.

'I came here tonight because when you realise you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.'

Ilya's tears fell thick and fast now. 'You see,' he sniffed. 'That is just like you, Hollander. You say things like this and make it impossible for me to hate you.' He reached up and grabbed Shane's chin in his hand. 'And I hate you, Shane.' His voice broke then. 'I really hate you.'

Shane let himself smile as Ilya pulled him into a kiss, a desperate, hungry kiss that tasted like the rest of his life.

Ilya smiled too, murmuring into Shane's mouth; something Russian.

Shane pulled away, his grin stretching throughout his whole being so that his body felt like it was made of starlight. 'What does that mean?'

'It means I love you, too.'

End Notes

Part Two in Ilya's POV? 👀

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